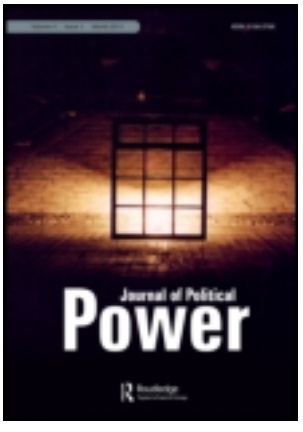

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EDITORIAL

Authority and experience

This special edition is the first collaborative publication by the *Authority Research Network* (ARN) and aims to contribute to the reinvigoration of thinking on authority – or new authority studies – focusing on the theme of experience. The ARN is a group of academics who first came together in 2008, as doctoral students, and who work collaboratively through writing retreats, workshops and symposia to push forward the theory of authority. The group includes the six main article authors in this edition – Claire Blencowe, Julian Brigstocke, Leila Dawney, Samuel Kirwan, Naomi Millner and Tehseen Noorani – as well as Aécio Amaral and Patrick Bresnihan.

The network emerged following discussions at the first Power conference at the University of Tampere in 2008: *Power: Dynamics, Forms and Consequences*. The conference set out an exciting agenda to engage with the theory of power, taking on board but moving beyond the seminal work of Foucault, Lukes and others. At the conference, we found that a sticking point in many otherwise productive discussions was the issue of 'positive power'. Everyone at the conference seemed to agree on the importance of Foucault's insight that power is productive and that it names a positivity, a form of existing and acting within the world, rather than just a category of normative analysis. However, the related concept of 'positive power' seemed to generate more confusion than it did productive analysis, especially as delegates attempted to converse across disciplinary boundaries. Everyone was having constantly to explain if they meant 'positive' in the sense of ontology or of norms. Moreover, despite a great wealth of empirical applications of Foucault's and Lukes' understanding of power as multiple, proliferating and decentralized, there was a clear lack of theoretical vocabulary for differentiating *between* various modes of productive power, describing power in its diversity and specificity. This conceptual lack seemed to us related to a long-standing problem with the 'governmentality studies' approach to power, wherein the focus on present empirical technologies of knowledge has fostered a relative disregard for questions of the multiplicity of the *frameworks* – the structures and habits of experience, the telos, the outside of thought – in relation to which such practices gain meaningfulness and affective grip.

We emerged from an enormously exciting set of conversations at that conference with a desire to commit to long-term collaborative theoretical work on the nature of power. In light of the above concerns, we turned to the concept of 'authority' – a concept which directs attention to *specific types* of power and which invites us to draw upon and reinvigorate a long tradition of theorizing power in its relation to knowledge, meaningfulness, aesthetics and the affective. The widely held

assumption that authority is in decline or no longer relevant was, in our view, much mistaken and based on a narrow understanding of where authority comes from. We were particularly interested in grasping the relation between immanence and authority; both in terms of the immanent, worldly, production of the external unworldly 'foundations' that are central to many narratives of authority, and to the seeming authority of immanence itself in the contemporary world, figured as self-presence, vitality or community. This shifts our intellectual focus on to the practices, technologies and performances that produce immanent foundations, outsides, or objectivities that provide the basis for authority, and enables a more nuanced understanding of authority as productive of forms of life. In part, this involves an attempt to *rescue* authority from discourses that identify it solely with domination; to instead think of authority in terms of how it can be mobilized for politics and practices of empowerment. We do not advocate a 'return to authority', but we do suggest that reinvigorating the concept may help to better understand the *how* of empowering particular groups and troubling particular regimes of domination and policing.

We recruited further members and, with generous support from the Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Bristol (IAS), commenced a programme of residential workshops or 'retreats'. At these writing retreats, which currently take place three times each year, we read a limited selection of classic and contemporary texts and collaboratively produce writings and diagrams, sketching out key lines of concern, contention and conceptualisation. The result over the years has been an entwining and folding of our work on diverse empirical sites and theoretical problems – the richness and productivity of which we hope is demonstrated in the papers of this edition. In 2010, we commenced a scoping study, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), called 'Immanent Authority and the Making of Community', including a symposium in which members of the network presented a variety of reflections on the value of theories of authority for understanding the contemporary problematic of community politics. Invited participants Ash Amin, Dewsbury, James, Munn-Giddings, Nash and Osborne concluded the day with a series of responses to the project.[1] This special edition presents extended versions of the papers from that symposium, including six full-length articles that explore different aspects of authority and experience, as well as shorter response pieces from Osborne, James and Dewsbury. We are enormously grateful to all the participants in the symposium and related events, to the IAS Bristol and the AHRC, and to Mark Haugaard and the generous reviewers of the *Journal of Political Power* for their contributions to and support for this work.

Reinvigorating the theory of authority

Authority is an uncomfortable and ambiguous form of political power. It is viewed with suspicion in much political theory, as it is a power relation that asks for obedience rather than consensus or reasoned debate. Immanuel Kant placed rejection of external authority at the heart of his characterization of 'Enlightenment'. For many, the appeal to authority as a social and political good evokes a dangerously conservative nostalgia for cohesive communities, strong families and traditional values. Some libertarian and anarchist theorists argue that societies can (and should) be organized without any 'artificial' authority structures at all. Yet, authority – a relation of free obedience based on consent and claims to 'know better' – is a central form of power through which modern societies are organized. Moreover, if

they are to succeed in creating change, it is necessary for minoritarian political claims to become authoritative; to create change is to make demands that cannot safely be ignored.

The analysis of authority relations was central to the work of classic social and political theorists such as Tönnies, Durkheim, Weber and Arendt. However, the concept of authority currently occupies a marginal place on the map of contemporary political theory. Max Weber's account of the modern shift from 'traditional' authority to 'legal-rational' authority, where appeal to immemorial traditions is replaced by appeal to abstract and impersonal norms or rules, remains a dominant model for understanding contemporary structures of authority. Weber's account of authority placed it within a historical narrative of modern rationalization, bureaucratization and disenchantment, where 'experiential' forms of authority based on tradition and charisma were to give way to rationalized and bureaucratic forms of authority. This 'disenchantment' narrative has rightly been criticized by writers who observe that religious, traditional and 'irrational' forces persist as major aspects of contemporary political life. Furthermore, that narrative draws upon and compounds highly problematic assumptions concerning the supposed irrationality and otherness of traditional political formations. Authority is everywhere bound up with various forms of knowledge, not only rationality, science and law but also affective processes, mystery, aesthetics and 'enchantment'. This has significant implications for understanding the workings of authority in contemporary societies.

The papers in this special issue approach the question of authority in ways that that take into account three key attributes of authority. Authority, we argue, is *plural*, *positive* and *experiential*.

First, authority is irreducibly *plural*. Modern (as perhaps all) societies have seen the emergence of new forms of authority. Bureaucracies and legal systems have developed over centuries to enable legal authority to become enormously powerful. Technologies of knowledge production and accumulation have fostered 'scientific objectivity' as a central referent of coordination of social life. Forms of authority that refer to growth, creativity or innovation (rather than to a point of past origin, eternal law or foundation) have proliferated and become ever more salient. For example, creativity and artists are seen to be authoritative, as are entrepreneurs and markets, scientists and innovators, and biological forces. However, this is a story of *addition and pluralization*, not of epochal progression, displacement or decline. Forms of authority that are based in tradition, memory and foundationalism have not gone away. Nostalgic discourses about the 'decline of authority' are themselves part of the authority production process in societies that idealize innovation, creativity and growth. There is no singular source of authority, but multiple, overlapping and often competing sources.

Second, the papers in this edition address authority as a 'positive' form of power – which we mean in the descriptive, rather than normative, sense of the term. The papers in this issue address the problem of authority (the question of how authority is possible, what forms it can take, and how it can be both undone and created) not as a normative question concerning legitimacy, but as a descriptive question concerning the conditions that make it possible for authority to be enacted. Authority is regularly posited, whether explicitly or implicitly, as a form of 'negative', oppressive power. But, it is by becoming authoritative – making political claims that effectively *demand a response* – that minoritarian social and political claims gain a power to build new worlds. Authority can be (and is) exercised by

the powerless upon the powerful. Authority does produce not only domination and oppressive power, but also democratic and dispersed forms of power, including powers of resistance and 'enabling' power.

Finally, authority is 'experiential', in at least two senses. First, authority is produced through orderings and diagrams of experience. Even as instrumental, rationality has unfolded through the minutiae of social life, new forms of spirituality and affective and aesthetic experience have also been perpetually emergent, forming new values, new meaningful relations and realities, or new 'tribes'. These affective and aesthetic formations have not disappeared (as Weber's theories imply they should), but have been inscribed within structures of political life, fostering and sustaining political authority. There is, then, an important *aesthetics* to the production of authority. Second, experience itself has become increasingly authoritative in contemporary societies. Whether through figures such as the 'expert by experience' or through ideas of the 'experience economy', the character and quality of experience have become a crucial source of authority in contemporary societies.

Summary of papers

The papers in this special edition approach the question of authority from diverse empirical, political and historical concerns. Claire Blencowe argues that authority is constituted through relations traced with forms of *objectivity* (understood broadly, in terms of the idea of a reality beyond subjective experience and standpoints). Authority is a means of anchoring experience; it mobilizes 'ideas of objectivity' as focus points for experience, enabling us to occupy worlds in common. Authoritative relationships, voices and statements draw upon those ideas of objectivity, playing upon perceived inequalities in our proximity to reality. The authority of figures as diverse as priests, scientists, judges or community groups, then, we can infer, comes from their occupation of a position that is recognized to be in some way closer to reality – and hence stronger, more trustworthy, or more reliable – than others. In particular, she argues that 'biopolitical authority' can be understood in terms of the (socially constructed) becoming objective of life. This helps to explain a view of biopolitics wherein the rise of the biological, or of the social as Arendt would have it, can be seen as leading to a production and pluralization of possibilities for politics, rather than to their elimination.

Starting from concerns tied more closely to the 'subjective' pole of authority, Leila Dawney analyses the ways in which authority is conferred upon figures who are recognized to have undergone particularly intense experiences of life: for example, experiences of suffering or of proximity to death. The authority that these lived experiences can confer, she argues, derives from the ways in which the bodies of these authority figures – by having touched the limits of subjective experience, and hence come closest to sheer, objective reality – come to materialize specific objectivities around which others can organize their emotional attachments. These bodies become focal points for a circulation of affective experiences of being-in-common. The authority of subjective experience, then, is conferred by the link with a common world beyond individual subjectivities to which it testifies.

Tehseen Noorani, similarly, shows how self-help groups run by mental health service users can create spaces in which individuals share experiences of distress and acquire new capacities to collectively experiment with and transform those experiences. As these experiments with subjective experiences progress through

time, the transformed experiences become more 'weighty', more authoritative, and hence more communicable, through their performance as objective knowledge. For example, 'voices simulation' role-play exercises that mimic the experience of 'hearing voices' (known in medicalized discourse as 'auditory hallucinations') can demonstrate that the reactions of non-voice-hearers to the role-play are congruous with the reactions of voice-hearers to their voices, and have the effect of performatively challenging fixed partitions between the 'sane' and the 'mentally ill'. Through the development of creative, experimental and dramaturgical techniques for sharing, working upon and communicating subjective experience, such spaces generate the capacity to make more authoritative claims for a rearrangement of roles, categories and hierarchies.

If we were to draw Blencowe's, Dawney's and Noorani's arguments into a different theoretical tradition, we might observe some surprising connections between this approach to authority and the Freudian account of the 'reality principle' as an experience of the *positivity* of social identity and reality. This in turn, however, raises a question, common to theorists such as Adorno, Lacan, Žižek and Nancy, about the impossibility of touching upon the 'real' through anything other than a traumatic experience of separation and distancing. If reality is only experienced in the moments where one's separation from it become most intensely felt, then authority becomes indexed, not just to the experience of 'presence' created through links to a common reality, but at the same time to the sense of *distance* that is such an experience's condition of possibility.

Such speculations cohere with the kinds of disruptive authority described by Samuel Kirwan and Naomi Millner. In Kirwan's deconstructive account of the contemporary 'politics of lost authority', drawing on the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, he discusses how contemporary communitarian and neoliberal politics are motivated by a desire for *intimacy*. Intimacy, here, is positioned in relation to two paradigmatic figures: community and locality. In terms of the arguments of Blencowe and Dawney, we might say that the intimacy of community and locality is at root the intimacy of touch: that is to say, of an embodied contact with objective reality, with inalienable connections with other people and with one's lived environment. Kirwan's theory invites radical political thought to move beyond the common Arendtian narrative of 'the loss of authority', which links authority to a lost presence or intimacy. He argues instead for a thinking of authority *as* disruptive absencing, thereby positioning 'loss' and 'authority' as *co-constitutive* rather than mutually exclusive. Authority, in this sense, does not make things present, but creates and draws on absence. Authority becomes the paradoxical assertion of an *exterior* intimacy – an embodied encounter with the unknown and unknowable. Authority, as loss, only touches upon reality as the impossibility of authentic contact with reality.

A similarly complex interplay between presence and absence and subject and object is discernible in Millner's account of 'experimental' authority and the politics of irregular migration. Like Kirwan, Millner focuses on the authority relations that make disruptive political events possible, through a study of the activities of the 'No Borders' anarchist network in migrants' camps in Calais. Through an argument that complements Noorani's focus on the link between authority and experimentation, drawing out the implications of Jacques Rancière's political and aesthetic theory for theorizing authority, Millner analyses the productive role of experimentation and creative forms of political organization in reclaiming notions of citizenship and

asserting particular rights claims. The constitution of new forms of authority, based on experience as an 'immanent ground', she argues, opens up new theatres for polemical political dissent.

One theme crossing each of these accounts is an interest in the *aesthetics* of authority – the ways in which authority makes itself seen and felt. Julian Brigstocke, through an archival study of experimental arts practices in late nineteenth century Montmartre, offers an initial framework for analysing the aesthetic structures of authority. Authority, he suggests, can usefully be analysed across three overlapping axes of experience: *amplitude*, *gravity* and *distance*. First, authority amplifies experience; but this amplification can take a number of forms: for example, making experience more extensive (by stretching further into the past, through tradition, or the future, through experimentation); or else by making it more intensive (felt with increased intensity in the present moment). Second, authority is a way of anchoring the world. Traditional authority figures are endowed with 'gravitas' – an ability to bear the weight of the world upon their shoulders. In modernity, however, the experience of authority is the experience of an anchoring in process, as participation. This explains the increased authority of the arts since the late eighteenth century: art has the capacity to arrest the world and to lend the most ephemeral and inconsequential moments the gravity of eternity. It also further explains the increased authority of experiencing life, as discussed by Blencowe, Dawney and Noorani. Finally, authority is asserted through the production of *distance*, as Kirwan's paper emphasizes. Authority figures always retain a mystery, a sense that they hold back a source of hidden power. Freud's extraordinary characterization of the authority of the psychoanalyst is exemplary in this respect: 'The doctor', he writes, 'should be opaque to his patients and, like a mirror, should show them nothing but what is shown to him'.

The issue closes with three perceptive commentaries from participants at the symposium out of which these essays emerged. Each addresses, in different ways, the *politics* of the approach developed in these papers. Thomas Osborne picks up a key theme cutting across the papers around the 'immanent', conventional nature of authority in modern societies, warning that whilst acknowledging the conventional nature of authority inevitably raises the problem of community, this acknowledgement should not be taken to bolster any kind of communitarian agenda. Rather, to admit that authority is immanent and conventional is to prioritize a key question that communitarianism has marginalized: in the name of what ideals of political community are we governed? Similarly, Ian James identifies a key strength and a further challenge for the perspective towards political power outlined and explored here. The project of identifying ways in which articulations, figures and agencies of authority can emerge from what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the 'open immanence' of a shared, 'singular-plural', non-totalisable material existence, he suggests, is crucial for exploring the possibilities for building non-totalizing forms of community and subjectivity. However, this demands a greater attentiveness to the material techniques through which the making of new forms of authority can be accomplished. Finally, J-D Dewsbury explores an important problematic in these papers concerning the contestation of what counts as 'politics', specifically raising the question of why 'the event' is so radical with respect to the possibility and theory of politics. He highlights the importance of the space of the body and the materiality of experience in the creation of forms of 'bio-cultural' authority. Forms of authority that are non-foundational, singular and ephemeral, he suggests, are created in

'micro' political spaces that are sensitive to 'the molecular beat of habit, affect and plasticity' (p.139).

Note

1. Immanent Authority and the Making of Community: A Scoping Study was part of the Connected Communities Programme led and funded by the UK AHRC. Literature Reviews from this and other projects, as well as information and sound files from the symposium, can be found on our website: www.authorityresearch.net.

Claire Blencowe, Julian Brigstocke and Leila Dawney